

THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN

TEXT: Luke 6:17-26

I would guess that for most of us the beautiful Sermon on the Mount, found in the Gospel of Matthew, is among our favorite Biblical passages. It contains words of comfort, words of assurance, words of grace. But how often do we read Luke's story of a similar sermon; a sermon that may not be as comforting or assuring, or even graceful. The words Pete just read for us seem to be a little strange, a little different. So what do we make of this?

Knowing that the writer of Luke's Gospel "tells it like it is", I would guess that this was the written a bit earlier than Matthew's version, although a case could be made for the reverse order. And it is quite likely that the writer of Matthew read Luke's words and decided to soften them a bit. Or, again, the reverse could be true. Here's what I mean:

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) quotes Jesus saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit". But Luke says only: "Blessed are the poor". That's a world of difference! Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a Methodist Pastor whom I often quote says this: "It's not that it's great to be poor, or hungry or mourning. But that blessings come from God, not from wealth or satisfaction or happiness. Not that those who are at ease now will be punished later, but that ease is not life, and if that's what you seek, sooner or later you will mourn what you missed. So don't miss it. God, turn my heart like a magnet toward the love that endures all poverty, grief and powerlessness, the life that is pure gift. Pure gift."

I want you to imagine that you are there in the first century in the hills of Galilee, following Jesus and his disciples. At a level place, Jesus turns and preaches, "Blessed are the poor, because the kingdom of God is yours". Material possessions are the natural meaning of Jesus' words. Jesus was not speaking about being humble and meek. Jesus is talking about physical possessions. Blessed are the poor. And we need to make good

note of this when we get to the end of our reading when Jesus says: “But woe to you who are rich, because you have received your comfort”. When Jesus spoke of the rich, he was not talking about the rich in spirit, but those who are rich in possessions. Jesus meant, therefore, that the poor are those who are physically and materially poor. He wanted his hearers to realize that the rich do not concern themselves with the kingdom of God because they are comfortable now and they do not see any need for Jesus in their lives.

Then Jesus adds fuel to another beatitude, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, because you will be filled”. He is talking about physical hunger for lack of food, not as Matthew talked about those who hunger only for righteousness. Again we see Jesus stating a physical problem that existed with the people who were following him. But rather than proclaim that the crowds would receive physical fulfillment of that hunger, Jesus just declares that they will be filled. To get the full meaning of Jesus’ words we again need to go to the latter part of his sermon. In verse 25 he states, “Woe to you who are full now because you will be hungry”. Once again, Jesus is teaching something radical to those following him. Those who are well off and not hungry physically are going to go hungry spiritually. The rich do not have a hunger for something more but are satisfied by the things of this world; they will not seek the spiritual things. The rich will go hungry when it comes to things that truly matter.

I especially love the third beatitude as recorded by Luke. “Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh.” Jesus does not say that all of his disciples will always have good times. He is not teaching that your problems will go away if you simply follow him. But Jesus is making a contrast to the future. If you weep now, you will laugh in the future. Again, we need to contrast this with words in the latter part of the reading: “Woe to you who are laughing now, because you will mourn and weep.” Again, Jesus is building on the lesson that those who are hurting now are not hurting in their relationship with God. And those who are well off now are not well off with God. Those who are weeping and sorrowful now (physical problem) will laugh (spiritual resolution). Those who are laughing now (physical resolution) will be mourning and weeping (spiritual problem).

In the fourth and last beatitude that Luke records, Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, insult you, and slander your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! Take note – your reward is great in heaven, because this is the way your ancestors used to treat the prophets.” Here again, Jesus describes a physical problem, that is people hate you, insult you, exclude you, and slander you because of God. But again he offers the spiritual resolution, “your reward in heaven is great”. Never does Jesus teach that our problems will be solved on earth. It is clear that Jesus is offering the people, and us, something greater. Because of their current problems and lack of wealth, they will be willing to listen to God’s message. This is not true for those whose lives are comfortable and easy. Again, we go to the end of the reading, in verse 26, “Woe to you when all people speak well of you, because this is the way their ancestors used to treat the false prophets”.

So, what are we to do with these Scriptures? What are we to do with Jesus’ persistent theme in the Gospel of Luke that warns of the dangers of the riches, of wealth and plenty of food? We live in a first world country. We have homes and jobs and retirements. We take our vacations. We eat too much and compared to the rest of the world, we are too fat. What are we to do with these bombshells that Jesus has thrown to us and the fact that God’s primary values may not be our own? How do we talk about materialism in today’s world when we ourselves are all so materialistic? How do we handle the theme of Jesus? “Blessed are the poor and hungry. Woe to the rich and well fed”.

What does it mean to be a Christian in a rich world? What does it mean to be a Christian in a middle class world where people live in nice homes, have good retirements, and plan nice vacations, all of which we call being blessed? How do we fit all of this into Jesus’ beatitudes in Luke? Do we simply ignore Luke’s version and listen to Matthew’s version which is so much more palatable for our lives? I believe we need to listen to what Luke is telling us.

First, we all know that money and what it can buy does not bring true happiness. A primary goal in life is not the accumulation of material possessions, but the accumulation of loving relationships with God and neighbors. We can be poor and still have hearts of love. Our bellies can be hungry and we can still have hearts of love.

Second, we are to be motivated to share our gifts with those around us. You cannot be a Christian and not share your love to your poorer family around the globe. That means helping to fund disaster relief throughout the world by supporting UMCOR and our local Disaster Relief Teams working in our communities on disaster relief. It means giving of our time as well as our resources to support the fledgling Family Promise of Grays Harbor (yes that's a blatant plug) in its mission of helping families find sustainable jobs and through jobs, housing.

Third, we must learn from the poor and the hungry and the persecuted in our own country and around the globe. We need to listen to them – really listen – and learn about their perceptions about work and jobs here and elsewhere. There are things you learn about faith and life and reverence that cannot be learned until we listen to those who are fighting poverty in their own lives.

Fourth, I am as capitalistic as anyone. But we need to work with others to create more economic systems that enable people to benefit directly from their own work. We need to be part of the vision for all people and all nations to become debt-free. Remember, if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

So, the question that comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain is, what does it mean to be a committed Christian when you are middle class and living in the wealthiest nation and belong to one of the wealthiest churches in the world? What does it mean to us when we hear the words of Jesus from the beatitudes of Luke? "Blessed are the poor and hungry. Miserable are the rich and the full". In our materialistic world, what do these words of Jesus mean to our lives of faith? We each must wrestle with it on our own. What does it mean to you? Amen.

